



Learning Transfer

An interview with Roy Pollock

Emma Weber

The need for and practice of Learning Transfer is gaining plenty of momentum in L&D circles around the world.

In this article Sydney-based Learning Transfer expert, Emma Weber, interviews Roy Pollock from Fort Hill Company in the US. He's the co-author of the best seller, *The 6 Disciplines of Breakthrough Learning*. In this first of a two-part series they discuss current research, trends and practical application. In the second part (in December) they will consider the role of the manager, the impact of technology on learning transfer and clearly show why this issue will become a significant priority for L&D professionals.

Why do you think Learning Transfer is such a hot topic right now?

I think there are several drivers. First, slower growth rates and increasing competition in most of the world's economies have forced business leaders to look for ways to improve productivity in everything their companies do. Given the currently poor rate of learning transfer following most programs—in a recent McKinsey survey, only 25 per cent of business leaders felt that training actually improved performance (deSmet, McGurk and Schwartz, 2010)—it is a rich opportunity for improvement. No company, nowadays, can afford to invest time and money in training and then not have it used.

The second driver is the development of practical and scalable approaches to driving learning transfer. The transfer issue has been discussed in the learning literature for more than 50 years but, until recently, there were no effective ways to follow-up with dozens or hundreds of participants.

The development of approaches like TLA® (Turning Learning into Action) and learning transfer support technologies such as ResultsEngine® have made it possible to support learners post program to ensure that learners apply what they have learned when they return to their jobs—which is the real point of training, after all.

What's your definition of Learning Transfer?

Many different definitions of learning transfer have been offered over the years. Baldwin and Ford (1988) in one of the earliest in-depth explorations of the topic, defined it as 'the degree to which trainees effectively apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes gained in training context to the

have a higher transfer rate than soft or interpersonal skills because they are usually immediately applicable and are required to perform the job. (There is some sort of accountability for use.)

The other problem is how transfer is defined. Are we speaking of the percent of the content that is transferred, or the number of participants who use something they learned successfully? In our view, the critical question is the latter. No one could, or would, expect someone to be able to use everything from a one-, two- or three-day course. But we could, and should, expect everyone to be able to use appropriate aspects of the training to improve their performance. That is why we like to define learning transfer as putting learning to work in a way that improves performance.

The key question becomes the one that Brinkerhoff proposed in the *Success Case Method*: 'Were you able to use something you learned to achieve a concrete, positive result?' He reports that in the absence of a defined follow-through process, only about 15 per cent of people can give specific examples in response to that question. Interestingly, that is almost exactly the percent Cal Wick found in the research he did that led to the development of ResultsEngine, which is described in the *Six Disciplines of Breakthrough Learning*. It is also the percent most often estimated by learning leaders when we ask them, 'What % of trainees apply what they have learned long enough and well-enough to improve their performance?' (Wick, Pollock and Jefferson, 2009, 'The New Finish Line for Learning', T&D).

Who has been doing the best and latest research in the area of Learning Transfer? And what are their findings?

That is why we like to define learning transfer as putting learning to work in a way that improves performance.

job'. We like to define it as 'the process of putting learning to work in a way that improves performance' to call attention to the fact that the real objective of training—and training transfer—is to improve the performance of individuals and the company; that is the *raison d'être* to having an L&D department in the first place.

Some studies show transfer levels of between 10 and 20 per cent. From your experience what level of transfer do 'typical' programs get back to the workplace?

It is tough to come up with a 'typical' number given the wide range of kind of training. In general, technical skills courses

There are two quite different sets of research on learning transfer: academic and pragmatic. The academic research is published in journals that most L&D professionals don't routinely scan, such as *Human Resource Development Review*, *Advances in Developing Human Resources* and so forth. It tends to be very theoretical or very focused and tightly controlled. As a result, it is often hard to see the applicability to corporate training and development.

The other body of research is focused on real-world, commercial application and is published in journals such as *T&D*, *Training and Development in Australia* and *Chief Learning Officer*. It tends to be more anecdotal but also more immediately applicable.

One of the leading researchers on the academic side is Elwood Holton at Louisiana State University. In particular, the 'Learning Transfer Systems Inventory' that he and his colleagues developed provides a useful construct for thinking about the factors that influence whether or not transfer occurs. It has also been the basis for a number of subsequent papers on transfer.

On the pragmatic side, there is, of course our own work, but I especially like the American Express study (www.ninthhouse.com/papers/AmEx_RealROI.pdf) that showed the importance of managerial involvement—and, in fact, concluded that a direct supervisor has the ability to 'make or break any training program'. ESI just published the results of a fairly extensive survey on current learning transfer practices (http://www.esi-intl.com/~media/Global-Web-Site/Files/US/PDF/Research-Reports/ESIUS_Applying-Training-Transferring-Learning-FULL-REPORT).

What are the top three things that a training provider can do to increase the level of transfer they are getting?

The first and most crucial thing to do is to make plans for supporting learning transfer a required part of every program design. This is really a change in mindset—for L&D professionals to take leadership on the issue of learning transfer. While the actual implementation of transfer support will involve others, especially learners' managers, as learning professionals we should accept responsibility for implementing plans and

processes to ensure transfer happens. It is in our own best interests as well as those of the participants the company to do so. A learning plan should be considered incomplete if it does not contain a section that discusses how learning transfer will be facilitated.

Second, redefine the finish line for learning. The prevailing paradigm among learners and even trainers is that when the course is finished, the work is done. In fact, the real work begins when the course ends—the work of putting learning to use in a way that improves performance. To get people focused on performance and application, define 'completion' of the program as the ability to provide concrete examples (achievement stories) of how the learning was used on the job in the ensuing weeks or months. Only award certificates of completion when people can provide such evidence. Consider a formal reconvene, webinar or teleconference as a forum at which people are expected to relate their application and achievements.

Third, implement scalable processes supported by appropriate technology. You cannot leave transfer to chance; that is what is done currently and it's why the yield from most training programs is so low. You need to have a specific process to check in with learners after the program, one that also involves their managers. The process needs to be explicit, communicated to everyone involved, and defined as an integral part of the learning process. While this can be done manually for small programs, you'll need a learning transfer support system, such as ResultsEngine, for large scale training programs. ■

Emma Weber is CEO of Lever Learning, which specialises in Learning Transfer and Evaluation. Lever Learning has an affiliation with US-based Fort Hill Company, and can provide access to Fort Hill's services to organisations in Australia. English by birth, Australian by choice, Emma enjoys living in Sydney's Northern Beaches. She moved to Australia in 2002 to start her own business and has never looked back. Email: emma@leverlearning.com

where
great
things
happen



TAE401101

Cert IV in Training and Education

- Class based
- Work Based
- TAA/BSZ Upgrades
- Online

Individuals or work groups
We can come to you for groups
through Australia

03 96608900
info@ascet.edu.au
www.ascet.edu.au



where
great
things
happen



Training Room for hire

- Corporate standard
- Melbourne CBD
- Seats 12 -25
- Smart Boards
- 1 day to 1 year

Call Susan/Megan
1300 655 544

